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3
ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 34



the Iranian revolution. The fall of the shah cost the United States a top-secret mountaintop monitoring station that for more than a decade stared right into the heart of the main Russian test range. Since then, U.S. intelligence agencies have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in developing the new generation of spy satellites, of which the shuttle cargo is merely the first to go into orbit.

NBC radio reporter Jay Barbree, who has covered NASA since the 1950s, may have been the first newsman to decipher the shuttle's secret mission. Barbree was ready to air his scoop in mid-November but was forced by the network to wait almost two weeks so his counterparts in television could prepare a story of their own. When NBC Pentagon correspondent Fred Francis called the Air Force on Nov. 28 for a routine confirmation of Barbree's exclusive, he triggered a major damage-control operation. The network agreed to quash the entire story after Weinberger phoned Lawrence Gross-

More than a squabble over the First Amendment: An end to truth in the skies?

Pentagon Versus Press

When it comes to manned missions, NASA has always followed a policy of freedom in space—allowing reporters almost unlimited access from liftoff to landing. But the era of truth in the skies is coming to an abrupt halt with the space shuttle's first overt military mission—a Jan. 23 flight designed to place a sophisticated spy satellite into orbit. Last week at a NASA press briefing, Air Force spokesman Brig. Gen. Richard Abel declared that reporters would be allowed no contact with the crews, no audio or video signals from the shuttle in orbit and no information whatsoever about the cargo. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, Abel said, had already intervened with three news organizations to suppress stories on the shuttle's payload. Abel also threatened to investigate if the press even *speculated* about its significance. "It was like waving a red flag in front of a bull," groused one top Reagan official. Sure enough, two days later The Washington Post cobbled together what it could on the satellite. And on national television, Weinberger bitterly denounced the newspaper for "giving aid and comfort to the enemy."

The fact that the Defense Department was putting a highly classified cargo aboard shuttle flight 51-C was no secret. Aviation Week (sometimes referred to by the Air Force as Aviation Leak) had reported as early as last April that the Pentagon planned to launch a device known as an Inertial Upper Stage (IUS) from the shuttle. Since the IUS has only one use—to put heavy payloads into high, stationary orbit along the equator—that fact alone revealed that the shuttle would probably be carrying a spy satellite of some importance—probably able to tune in on a wide variety of Soviet radio, telephone, microwave and satellite transmissions. In a way, the new satellite is the son of

man, the president of NBC News. According to Grossman, Weinberger stressed that "this was a matter of utmost national security." The defense secretary's apparent reasoning was that the more information the Soviets had, the more easily they could track the shuttle launch and the satellite. CIA Director William Casey also made a separate plea to NBC executives.

Cooperation: A senior Pentagon official compared the next few days "to trying to keep a chicken-house quiet next to a busy highway." Weinberger interrupted a meeting with West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to dissuade CBS News from running the story. Top Pentagon officials won similar cooperation from The Associated Press. NEWSWEEK decided not to print details about the shuttle mission at the request of senior administration and military officials. The Washington Post had not been tracking the story at all—and had not even sent a reporter to the Abel briefing. "What we really did was put it together from what was known," says executive editor Benjamin Bradlee. "It [gave] a semblance of hot news, but it wasn't, really."

So had the Post actually harmed the national security? No, says Bradlee—and Senate Intelligence Committee vice chairman Daniel Moynihan agrees: "In my judgment and in [committee chairman] Barry Goldwater's judgment, there is nothing in that story that was not already public knowledge." That in itself puzzles many in Washington. The volume of leaks on the shuttle has been so great, in fact, that some speculate that the Air Force itself may be responsible—perhaps trying to discredit NASA in order to win support for its own new fleet of unmanned satellite launchers. Whatever the truth, it is hard to believe that so many could know so much about a "secret" without the Soviet Union's knowing most of it, too.

WALTER SHAPIRO with KIM WILLENSON in Washington and LUCY HOWARD in New York